



STRENGTH VS CARDIO - WHICH IS BETTER FOR THE HEART?

It's an old exercise debate: Is cardio or strength training better for you? It's commonly disputed in terms of weight loss or fat loss, but if you're at risk of developing heart disease, you may be wondering if one form of exercise trumps the other when it comes to heart health.

First things first: Physical activity in any form is good for your heart.

According to the research, being sedentary is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

Regular exercise is associated with positive changes in the heart's structure and function and can reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke, lower "bad" cholesterol, increase "good" cholesterol and help your body use insulin more efficiently. It also makes it easier to get through everyday activities.

Exercise also helps you achieve a healthy weight, which is important if you're concerned about your heart. Being overweight can increase your risk of high blood pressure or diabetes, which can contribute to heart disease and ultimately heart failure. Plus, extra weight can put extra stress on your heart, making it more difficult for it to do its job.

Maintaining a healthy weight is part of the equation to help with lots of those different risk factors.

1. CARDIO FOR HEART HEALTH

In a way, the effects of cardio training on the heart are obvious: You feel your heart rate increase when you jog down the road, climb up a flight of stairs or exert yourself in some other way. It comes as no surprise, then, that cardio plays an important role in optimising heart health.

When you do cardio — defined as any activity that increases heart rate and respiration while using large muscle groups repetitively and rhythmically — you're supporting your heart, lungs, and circulatory system.

Cardiovascular exercise offers specific benefits for the heart, including the ability to:

- Reduce blood pressure
- Lower cholesterol levels
- Improve blood sugar control
- Help with weight management

Other heart-healthy benefits of cardio include:

Lower Resting Heart Rate

Regular cardio exercise lowers your resting heart rate. Physical activity also improves circulation, which helps the body deliver oxygen to the body more efficiently. That means the heart muscle does not have to work as hard to supply blood to all the vital tissues and organs.

Aids Circulatory and Respiratory Systems

One-way researchers measure the ability of the circulatory and respiratory systems to deliver oxygen to the body's skeletal muscles is through cardiorespiratory fitness.

An August 2020 study published in the Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research assigned adults who were overweight to a specific exercise program for 12 weeks and found those in the high-intensity interval training group had better cardiorespiratory fitness than groups who performed other types of exercise. They concluded that high-intensity interval training was the best type of cardio exercise to improve the circulatory and respiratory systems.

Helps Reduce Stress

Stress from relationship woes to work deadlines, can negatively affect your heart. A September 2021 study published in Hypertension found people with high levels of stress hormones were at increased risk of experiencing high blood pressure and cardiovascular events, such as stroke or heart attack.

Cardio exercise is a great stress reducer, it can reduce stress hormones while promoting feel-good endorphins, which could leave you feeling more relaxed and in a better mood once you wrap up your workout.



2. STRENGTH TRAINING FOR HEART HEALTH

Strength training, on the other hand, may not offer as many obvious heart benefits, but they are certainly there.

This form of exercise is always a good idea — it helps build strong bones, aids in weight management and improves symptoms associated with chronic conditions.

Strength training also can benefit your heart in specific ways. Many of the benefits you'll find from cardio training apply to strength training as well, including:

- Improved control of cholesterol
- Better blood sugar management
- Help with weight management
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced risk of health issues like hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease

You don't need to necessarily lift super heavy to get them. Lighter weights and more reps will work as good as lifting heavy for less. Getting to that feeling of failure is key.

Some additional benefits of strength training for heart health include:

Increases Calorie Burn at Rest

One of the main benefits of strength training for heart health is that it can increase the number of calories you burn at rest. And more calories burned during the day contributes to weight management, which translates to better heart health.

If you have more muscle mass and you're in better condition, your basal metabolic rate — the calories you burn just sitting around is higher. Your metabolism is basically revved up by having more muscle mass.

Reduces Fat Around the Heart

Lifting weights also appears to help reduce the amount of fat surrounding the heart. A small study in July 2019 published in JAMA Cardiology found that participants who completed three, 45-minute strength-training sessions a week for 12 weeks reduced a specific type of heart fat called pericardial adipose tissue by 31 percent. Those who did aerobic exercise for the same amount of time only saw an 11 percent reduction. The researchers also noted that both types of exercise reduced another type of heart fat, called epicardial adipose tissue.

Improves Blood Pressure

The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research study mentioned above also found the group that participated in 12 weeks of strength training had a better vascular profile — which essentially refers to the blood flow in your heart and arteries and impacts blood pressure — compared to groups who performed other types of exercise.



THE BOTTOM LINE ON STRENGTH VS. CARDIO TRAINING FOR HEART HEALTH

So, what wins out in the strength training vs. cardio debate? At the end of the day, the two types of exercise work best together, and you should incorporate both into your exercise routine to maximise heart health.

One form of exercise does not significantly offer better cardiac benefits than the other. Your heart does not care what you do, nor can it tell what type of exercise you are doing.

Here are four ways to maximize heart health with your fitness routine:

1. Combine Cardio and Strength Training

All exercise is good for the heart and marrying the two forms of exercise leads to the best possible outcomes.

In fact, a January 2019 study published found that people at risk of cardiovascular disease who did a combination of cardio and strength training for eight weeks saw greater cardiovascular benefits (including lower blood pressure and improved cardiorespiratory fitness and lean body mass) compared to those who did aerobic or resistance training alone.

2. Clock Enough Time

It's recommended to do strength training at least twice a week, plus add at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic exercise each week. When it comes to cardio, aim to be slightly breathless. So, if you're walking or running with a friend, it should be difficult to keep a conversation going.

3. Pick an Activity You Enjoy

Ultimately, the best exercise is the one you'll stick with and incorporate into your routine. At the end of the day, do something that you enjoy, that you can be consistent with because consistency in all forms of exercise will yield the greatest physical, mental, and cardiac benefits.

If the gym or treadmill isn't for you, try walking, swimming, or cycling for cardio and try at-home streaming workouts or body-weight exercises to add in strength training.

While the greatest cardiovascular benefits come from a combination of cardio and strength training, any intentional movement will always leave you feeling better, stronger and your heart healthier.

4. Get Other Lifestyle Habits in Check

One last thing to remember: Exercise alone isn't going to keep your heart healthy. All the strength training in the world, all the cardio in the world won't cancel out a bad diet. Adding that, sleep, social connection, and stress management play a critical role in keeping your heart healthy, too. Take care of your heart, and your heart will take care of you.

